

Recruitment and Retention

Top 10 Tips

1. Understand the 80:20 rule and that nurturing existing member is far easier than finding new ones
2. Commit to finding out about your members, how they use their membership and what they think about your business
3. Invest in technology (which need not be expensive) to take the hard work out of any membership management programme
4. Be consistent in all your communication with your members. If they take part in a survey let them know the results. If they are used to a monthly newsletter make sure they keep receiving one.
5. Make someone responsible for membership communication and give them a plan.
6. Don't be embarrassed about marketing to your members as actively and effectively as you would your visitors or potential members. Just because they have paid their membership dues this year doesn't mean they will again next year. Loyalty must be earned.
7. Focus on your most valuable members, those that regularly use the club and get the most from their membership. Find out the type of person they are, how you are meeting their needs. Use that information to keep them happy and find similar new members
8. Stay within the law. Acquiring and storing member data is governed by strict regulations. Make sure you obey them and know if they change.
9. Review your membership and its needs. One survey every time there is a problem is not enough. Constantly review your membership so you can respond to their needs. That includes members who may be leaving. Carry out exit surveys.
10. Make sure everyone signs up. Knowing your members and looking



after them requires everyone from your staff to senior members to commit to the idea and make sure it happens

Membership Referral Programmes

Word of mouth marketing is the most powerful sales tool and one of the hardest to control. Therefore, any club seriously embarking on a long term membership marketing plan needs to ensure that membership satisfaction is already high on your list of priorities.

Your members can be your best ambassadors and your worst advocates. Keeping them happy requires effort and commitment, together with regular feedback and communication so you are constantly feeling their pulse. Assuming that the level of member satisfaction and pride in the club is high, then you should first turn to your existing members in your efforts to find new recruits. The importance of this needs to be communicated to them. It is amazing how many traditional private members clubs are mistakenly under the illusion that their club has a healthy waiting list, whereas that was probably the case five years ago when they joined but now it's a very different story.

You don't have to paint a picture of doom and gloom - far from it - but when putting any membership referral programme in place, you need to explain what its objectives are. It is their club and everyone has a part to play in creating a healthy future. You need to share the bad news as well as the good so if you need to top up your waiting list, tell them. Explain the benefits of being able to keep membership subscriptions down, create income to improve the facilities and stressing that there will be no effect on their access to the course!

Here is a simple membership referral programme

1. Programme announcement - a letter needs to be sent to members explaining the programme, the objectives behind it and how they can support it by

sponsoring friends, family and business associates. All the information also needs to be put on the website in the members section, together with notices on the notice board.

2. Building the list - once on board, your ambassadors need the tools to be able to do their job. The clubs should start a prospects list which can combine all of the inquiries the club receives- name, address, telephone number, together with details of how their interest arose. Members should be given a proposal card on which they can put down the names and contacts of prospective members and give it to the club administrator.

3. Making contact - prospective members will then receive a formal letter from the administrator or membership secretary together with their sponsor. This could be an invitation to join depending on the level of interest, or more typically an invitation to come and enjoy the club's facilities together with their sponsor. You should consider waiving the guest green fee. Make sure the member is fully aware of when the letter has gone out and communicate with him or her on any progress.

4. Member and guest days - members can make their own arrangements to entertain their guest and then meet the membership secretary or administrator, or the club can create special member and guest receptions/golf days at various times throughout the year. This is the preferred way as it ensures the key people in the membership development programme - typically the membership committee, the secretary and the professional - are all on hand to meet and greet the prospects and ensures you can build a personal contact with them. The meetings need to be informal as no one should be pressurised into joining.

5. Selling the benefits - at any face to face meeting with a prospective member make sure you are aware of their profile and which membership category or benefits they would typically be drawn to. You need to focus on the activities and fellowship involved in belonging to a club, the facilities and services of the club and the benefits of membership. These are typically golf access, socialising, family use, business entertainment and meeting new people.

6. Follow-up letters - it is unlikely that every prospect will sign up immediately so following the event they should receive a follow up letter from the club. This should reiterate the benefits, outline the joining terms and annual subscriptions and inviting the person to join. Don't be afraid to ask for the sale. The letter

should be written in a way that it demands a reply.

7. Review your list - Not everyone will say yes immediately. You will know from their reasons why they haven't joined as to whether they are a serious potential prospect for the future. It may be that the time is not right so ask if they will agree to you keeping in contact. They should, for example, receive your club newsletter. The important thing is to constantly review your waiting list and send communication to remind them you are there. It also means they will let you know if they are no longer interested.

8. Start all over again - keep reminding your ambassadors about the membership referral programme. You need a steady supply of referrals if you are expected to convert a reasonable number. Send a reminder every six months and don't wait until your membership renewal time when it may be far too late.

Local Community Marketing

Your local community should provide a wealth of potential new member prospects but it takes effort and commitment to build up relationships in these areas. Word of mouth marketing is just as successful coming from the local opinion leaders and influencers in your area and these typically tend to operate within the local business community. Finding them is actually quite easy. Ideas could include:

- **Contacting your local Chamber of Commerce** - they will have regular meetings and regular communication with their members and you could tailor an offer around a corporate membership which they can communicate on your behalf. If they are bringing their members a genuine benefit not available anywhere else then it will help them in their recruitment.
- **Inviting local business groups** to use your club for their meetings or a charity golf day. Some clubs have even developed a corporate social programme which allows business people to entertain clients for lunch or meet for coffee or hire a meeting room at a special rate.
- **Special promotions in conjunction with local businesses** - your local Chamber of Commerce or Council will be able to give some idea of the businesses in your area and their size. You will be able to gauge the likely profile of their employees and whether it matches any of your membership segments and can



then tailor an offer accordingly. The head of the HR department would be the typical person to contact and he or she will be only too glad to promote an employee benefit. Golf based businesses such as local retail outlets or driving ranges are obvious examples of where mutual business marketing relationships would work well.

- **Charity days** - working with local charities has two benefits. Firstly it will allow you to reach a wide range of potential members and secondly it is great PR for your club. Write to the organiser of a charity introducing your club and its facilities and suggesting a golf day may be a way for them to raise revenue. They may be a non-golfer so arrange a meeting so they can meet your team and understand how you can help in organising their golf day.

- **Local residents** - no one will know your local area better than you and you have the advantage of being on local people's doorsteps. Be aware of what is happening round and about you. For example if a new housing estate is being built and it's likely to be targeting your member profile, then strike up a relationship with the builder. One enterprising golf club created a special deal for all new house purchasers with a trial period offer and a reduced joining fee. The builder was happy to market it as it was another benefit and the local agents were quickly able to gauge who was a likely prospect.



Internal Marketing

- **Member communication** - your membership referral programme should take priority here so remember to keep your website updated and to gently remind members at key times through the year.
- **Club notice board** - all sorts of people come into your clubhouse - playing visitors, social visitors, societies, local groups who may have hired a function room. Produce some Join Our Club leaflets containing general details and pushing them to your website for the full offer. This will allow you to change it periodically without having to reprint all your marketing material.
- **Your club website** - make sure there is a special area in the visitors section which promotes membership and all its benefits.

External Marketing

- **PR and advertising** - these are two of the tools most often used by clubs to generate business. Advertising needs to be well thought out and part of an overall plan. PR should start with your local media. You could suggest running a golf day in conjunction with your local newspaper or radio station, especially if they have a charity fund raising initiative.
- **Direct mail** - a leaflet drop in the local community may work for some clubs but not everyone as it is difficult to target it. However, it is possible to buy direct mail list of people fitting your membership profile in a specific area. Read more about conducting a direct mail campaign in our ****direct marketing section****.
- **Telemarketing** - there are telemarketing companies which specialise in generating member leads for clubs and organisations. This may be worth exploring if you require a more subtle form of marketing your club memberships. You must have a very clear idea of the type of person you are targeting and whether this matches their data profile. It can also be expensive.



Review Your Membership Structure

As well as knowing who you are marketing to and where you can find your potential new members, it is important to be clear about what exactly you are marketing.

Until the last few years, life has been relatively simple for all businesses including golf clubs when it came to marketing to customers. However, businesses are now discovering that their potential audience is becoming increasingly segmented and they have to offer different variations of their products or services in order to meet demand and compete.

A golf club's products are typically memberships and green fee packages. Green fee packages have been relatively easy to tailor but membership offerings require far more thought and planning.

Traditional membership structure

A golf club membership typically consisted of full male membership, full women membership (typically with reduced playing access at weekends), five day men, seniors and juniors. Most, with the exception of juniors, also required a joining fee payable in the first year.

The move towards equality within golf clubs has seen full memberships and five day memberships typically combine so that there is now one full membership at the same rate open to men or women with full playing rights and similarly a five day membership open to both.

More and more golf clubs are phasing out senior membership to new members and even existing members as the average age of a golf club member increases and it has become unsustainable to offer reduced fees to such a large segment of a typical club's membership.

Whether you choose to offer some kind of incentive to your members is really at the discretion of your club.

Incentivising Members



Private clubs should find that members are incentivised by the fact it's their club and they are securing a healthy future.

People also don't like to feel they have benefited as the result of a friend or a business colleague spending money. It may be better to reverse the incentive and give it to the new member. For example, a reduced joining fee for being introduced under the membership renewal programme. That will make the sponsor feel they have added a genuine benefit to the whole process and the new member will be happy at this value added deal.

Maintaining current membership levels has never been harder for most golf clubs, but by finding out their needs and offering special membership retention promotions you can encourage them to stay.

Know Your Members

In the current economic climate maintaining current membership levels has never been harder for most golf clubs. But the good news is that contrary to popular industry perception, the growth of the game has never been so strong. Participation levels are rising - more than 5% among adults in 2006, whilst interest in the game among juniors and women is also growing. That means no shortage of potential customers!

However, what is changing is the way that people are choosing to participate. Joining a club is no longer high on the agenda for golfers; hence the decline in waiting lists for many golf clubs and an increasing emphasis on protecting their existing member base.

In order to do so and to attract new members, it is vital that you understand what your members want. They are your most valuable asset and a healthy membership base, actively using your club and its facilities should be at the core of any successful golf club.

What You Need To Know About Your Members

The old adage that 20% of your customers are responsible for 80% of your business is equally true within golf clubs. Every club has a core membership who



regularly plays in competitions, supports club fixtures, buys tickets to social occasions, uses the bar and restaurant and supports the pro. If you were to analyse who they were, they would almost certainly amount to around 20% of your member base.

The fact is that golf clubs know little if anything about their membership and much of their decision making is based on anecdotal evidence rather than hard facts. By finding out more about your existing membership you can not only generate more income through them but can also find and target potential new members with a similar profile to your existing best customers

There are three key things you must know about your members:

Who they are - this is not just their name and address but their age, marital status, family, occupation. This is not intrusive but designed to help you help them get the most from their membership

Their playing habits - when they play, who they play with, how often they play, do they enter competitions, do they put handicap cards in, have they ever had a handicap

How much do they spend - this may seem mercenary but do they use the bar, or catering facilities, do they support the professional, if not then why not? If they do, then why can be just as important to know.

As well as the obvious areas about what they do and how they use their membership you can also use them to help improve what you offer existing and prospective members. What they think about their golf club and what they expect from their membership can be real eye openers - sometimes uncomfortable ones but often easy to act upon.

What they think about competitors is also key. If you know how they regard your competition it is easier to make sure you differentiate yourself from them.

These last two questions about their attitude to their membership should not just be confined to members. Visiting societies are also a useful source of information and at the very least they should be asked what they thought about their experience either formally through a questionnaire or in a follow-up telephone call a few days after their visit.

Finding Out About Your Members

It is simple and cost effective to conduct your own market research almost without your members realising it. A member survey once a year should be at the top of your agenda in getting to know your customer base. It is relatively easy to administer as you have a captive market and should be able to communicate with them on a regular basis (see section on Communicating with members more effectively).

Before conducting any survey it is important to understand what it is you are trying to find out. It may be about a specific area where you are having problems such as the catering or encouraging use of the bar. These are quite easy to administer as there are specific questions you will need to ask.

A general survey about how they regard their membership experience is more difficult to create but can be made easier by splitting your membership into distinct groups.

There will be the top 20% of your customers and there the objective will be to discover what they like and why they use the club; then there will be those who are intermittent supporters and the secret is to find out what they like and dislike and how they could be encouraged to use the club more; then there are those members who play once a year and are hardly ever seen.

A word of caution about this last group. In the old days of membership waiting lists and joining fees, those members who regularly paid over £1000 a year and then hardly played would have had your finance committee rubbing their hands with glee. The fact is that in these days where joining fees are often a thing of the past and it is easier to get into another local club, there is no longer the financial commitment which would keep many members tied in, even though at a cost per round it was hardly value for money.

These members may have been hard work to acquire and keeping them should be top priority. Finding out why they are not using the club; have their circumstances changed, may give you the opportunity to find a solution to suit both you and the member and make sure they stay.

Define Your Member Groups



Once you have found out more about your members, stored the information legally and in an easy to use database programme, and committed to a regular communication campaign, it is important to make sure that the messages you are communicating are right for each member group.

There are the obvious ones - women, juniors and seniors - but remember the information you have acquired through your membership survey will mean there are now members who haven't visited for six months; members who used to use the restaurant and bar but don't any longer; members who may have brought a society along for the past few year but no longer...the list is endless. It doesn't need to be complicated but by segmenting your 1000 members into manageable groups it is amazing what can be achieved with relevant, targeted information, offers and promotions.

Knowing your members allows you to identify your best areas for growth. For example, could a member referral programme leading up to your annual membership renewal time be the cost effective alternative to expensive direct marketing. Do you have a large segment of your membership who don't play at weekends at all which could point to a new membership structure based around peak and off peak times?

Review Your Membership

You will by now have built up an excellent picture of your members and how they are using their membership. This is an excellent starting point for the membership section within your marketing plan.

However, once having analysed your membership you need to keep doing so on a regular basis. A snapshot every six months would be the minimum especially as the nature of the game makes it a very cyclical business, with the results in the height of summer very different to those in January.

Things change much faster than they ever used to and you need to be aware of external influences as well as internal ones. For example, the completion of a new housing estate a few miles down could explain an influx of members during the past few months- and could point to a source of more.

Regular reviews will also allow you to see the changing demographics of your



membership. The average age of a golf club membership has been increasing steadily in recent years, mirroring general population demographics. This has had economic consequences for many clubs who have seen their senior membership (often paying reduced fees) grow out of proportion with their club membership. A regular review and the statistics to back it up would have meant many golf clubs addressing this issue long before it became a problem.

It is also important to conduct an exit survey with those members who are leaving. It may require a telephone call to go through it with them but it will be well worth it. It is possible you may spot a worrying trend which you will need to act upon. It may also be possible to turn a lapsed member back into a current member if you can address the issue they may have. If you don't ask, you won't know and you won't be able to do anything about it.